

Exploring the Role of Socio-Emotional Learning in Promoting Academic Achievement and Student Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) has gained global recognition as a framework for improving academic achievement and holistic student development. This study examines the relationship between SEL implementation and academic outcomes and student welfare. Using a mixed-methods approach, we collected data from 300 high school students and conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 educators. Results showed a positive correlation between SEL competencies and academic performance, along with significant improvements in emotional regulation, motivation, and school connectedness. These findings underscore the importance of integrating SEL into school curriculum to encourage optimal student development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the dynamics of contemporary education, there is an urgent need to revisit teaching and learning approaches to respond to 21st-century challenges that emphasize not only cognitive abilities, but also the social and emotional aspects of students. The concept of Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) is present as a response to this need. SEL is a systematic process in which students acquire and apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes to understand and manage emotions, form positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2020). However, the implementation of SEL in the local context of Indonesia still faces various structural and cultural challenges that need to be elaborated in more depth.

Education in Indonesia, historically, has emphasized more on cognitive aspects that are oriented towards academic achievement alone, by ruling out the importance of character development and non-cognitive competencies (Sutisna, 2018). In fact, as emphasized by Wulandari and Fitria (2021), students who have good emotional regulation and social relationship skills are better able to face academic pressure and show perseverance in learning. Their study conducted at a State High School in Palembang showed that students' emotional involvement plays a significant role in achieving academic achievement.

Furthermore, the SEL approach is also considered to be able to improve the classroom climate and encourage active student participation in learning. The results of research by Novitasari and Rahmawati (2020) in Yogyakarta show that the SEL program carried out in a structured manner improves students' empathy and communication, as well as reduces the incidence of peer conflict. This is in line with the thinking of Durlak et al. (2011) who emphasized that social-emotional learning contributes greatly to students' social and psychological adjustments.

The importance of SEL is even more relevant when it is associated with the challenges of globalization and digital disruption that give rise to new psychological pressures on students. In this context, Prasetyo and Amelia (2022) stated that the implementation of empathy-based learning and strengthening self-identity through SEL can be a preventive strategy to deal with mental health problems among adolescents. This study was conducted in South Jakarta and highlights the importance of teacher training to be able to facilitate SEL effectively.

In addition, the reality of cultural and social diversity in Indonesia is also an important factor in the implementation of SEL. According to Marlina and Yulianti (2019), SEL's approach that is sensitive to the local cultural context is easier to accept by students and teachers. In their research in primary schools in NTB, it was found that the incorporation of local values in SEL teaching increases students' sense of belonging and social responsibility.

Based on the above findings, it increasingly appears that quality education is not only determined by exam results, but also by the emotional well-being of students. Ningsih and Hidayat (2020) underline that schools that apply a humanistic approach in learning tend to produce students who are more resilient and able to manage academic pressure. In other words, the integration of SEL into the curriculum does not only add to the content, but rather strengthens the foundation of education itself.

However, it is undeniable that the implementation of SEL in schools still faces various obstacles. First, not all teachers understand the concept and practice of SEL thoroughly. Research conducted by Fitriani and Kusumawardani (2021) shows that most teachers in Sleman Regency do not have special training on social-emotional learning. This has an impact on inconsistent implementation in the classroom and low monitoring of the impact of SEL on students.

Second, challenges also come from education policies that still focus on cognitive-based assessments. A study by Ramadhani and Yusnita (2019) states that national policies have not accommodated the systematic measurement of non-cognitive success. In fact, the success of SEL lies in changes in students' attitudes, behaviors, and emotional balance that are long-term and difficult to detect by written exams.

Third, parental involvement is also an important factor that is often overlooked. According to Haris and Santosa (2021), family support for SEL values greatly determines the sustainability of its influence outside of school. When school and home have the same vision of the importance of managing emotions and empathy, students will experience a consistent and meaningful learning process.

On the other hand, some schools have shown innovation in implementing locally-based SELs. For example, in East Lombok Regency, the "Child-Friendly School" program developed by the local Education Office integrates the SEL approach with local wisdom, such as the value of mutual cooperation and respect for parents (Lestari & Wahyuni, 2020). This program has succeeded in creating a more inclusive and harmonious learning environment.

In an urban context, the SEL approach has also been shown to be effective in reducing the rate of juvenile delinquency and violence in schools. A study by Rizal and Maulidya (2022) at SMK Kota Surabaya revealed that students who participated in SEL activities showed a significant decrease in aggressive behavior and were more open in resolving conflicts through dialogue. This shows that SEL has the potential to strengthen character education in a real way.

Based on the above review, the urgency of implementing SEL in Indonesia's national education system is increasingly undeniable. Socio-Emotional Learning is not just an alternative approach, but an integral part of future education. SEL integration must be carried out systematically through teacher training, thematic curriculum development, and non-cognitive competency-based evaluation. Support from the government, schools, and the community is needed so that this transformation can take place in a sustainable and comprehensive manner.

Thus, this study aims to explore more deeply how socio-emotional learning can affect students' academic achievement and well-being at the secondary school level. This study will not only look at the relationship between SEL and academic achievement, but also assess its impact on the psychological and social aspects of students. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of the implementation and effectiveness of SEL in the context of pluralistic Indonesian education.

2. METHODS

This study uses a convergent mixed-methods approach, which aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the influence of socio-emotional learning (SEL) on academic achievement and well-being of secondary school students. This approach allows for the incorporation of quantitative and qualitative data collected in parallel, then analyzed separately and combined in the outcome interpretation stage to obtain complementary and reinforcing findings.

Quantitative data was obtained through the distribution of questionnaires to 300 students from five secondary schools in urban areas. The instruments used in this data collection include the SEL Competency Scale adapted from the Social-Emotional and Character Development Scale (SECDS), the measurement of academic achievement through GPA scores reported by the school, and the WHO-5 Welfare Scale to assess the subjective well-being of students. The data were analyzed using SPSS software, with Pearson correlation techniques and multiple linear regression to identify relationships and influences between variables.

Meanwhile, qualitative data was obtained through semi-structured interviews with 15 educators, consisting of subject teachers and school counselors. The interview was conducted online using a video conferencing platform and lasted for 30–45 minutes per respondent. The interview guide is designed to explore educators' perceptions of SEL implementation, the barriers they face, and the impact of SEL on student behavior and well-being. Qualitative data were analyzed using a thematic coding approach with the help of NVivo software, thus enabling the discovery of patterns, key themes, and triangulation with quantitative findings.

The entire data collection process lasted ten weeks. This research procedure prioritizes research ethics, including written consent from respondents, data confidentiality guarantees, and participants' right to withdraw at any time during the research process.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that there is a significant relationship between students' social-emotional competence and their academic achievement and level of psychological well-being. Through quantitative data analysis of 300 students, it was found that SEL scores were statistically positively correlated with GPA scores ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$) and student welfare scores ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$). These results reinforce the argument that strengthening social-emotional competence not only contributes to mental health, but also

supports students' academic learning performance. The multiple regression model further identified that two subcomponents of SEL, namely self-awareness and self-management, were significant predictors of academic achievement ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$). These findings are in line with Durlak et al. (2011) who stated that SEL-based interventions can increase academic achievement by 11% compared to the control group.

Furthermore, qualitative findings from interviews with 15 educators show a positive impact of the implementation of SEL practices in teaching and learning activities. Teachers observed that students who engaged in SEL activities became more aware of their feelings, more empathetic toward others, and showed improvements in emotional control when faced with stress. One teacher stated that "emotional reflection and discussion at the beginning of class makes students better prepared to accept the lesson, because they are already channeling the emotional burden they may have brought from home." This shows that emotional learning plays a role as a foundation for students' learning readiness.

SEL learning also plays a role in creating a more positive classroom climate. Teachers reported a decrease in conflicts between students and increased cooperation in study groups. The implementation of strategies such as "emotional check-in," "taste journaling," and "peer appreciation" activities strengthen relationships between students and create a safe space for them to express themselves. This is supported by a study by Brackett et al. (2019) which shows that students who learn in a healthy social-emotional environment are more likely to develop intrinsic confidence and motivation.

One of the interesting findings of this study is the relationship between improving SEL competencies and student involvement in the learning process. Teachers noted that students became more active in asking questions, daring to express opinions, and being more involved in group discussions. This increase is considered as a result of SEL activities that build confidence and develop reflective thinking skills. Taylor et al. (2017) also emphasized that SEL promotes the development of metacognition, i.e. awareness of one's own thought processes, which is an important indicator of active learning.

In terms of student well-being, the data shows that SEL competencies contribute significantly to students' mental health and subjective happiness. The WHO-5 well-being score was higher in students with a good SEL score, especially on the indicators of feeling happy, calm, and full of energy. This indicates that students who are able to recognize and manage their emotions tend to experience more stable well-being. Domitrovich et al. (2017) underline that SEL plays a preventive role in maintaining mental health, especially in the face of academic stress and social conflict.

The findings of this study also show that strengthening social-emotional competence helps students in building healthy coping strategies. Some teachers said that students who previously had frequent emotional outbursts or withdrawn from socializing began to show changes in the way they responded to difficult situations. With training in emotion regulation and conflict resolution, students become better able to make wise decisions and develop resilience. One of the students, according to the teacher's report, began to be able to control his anger by performing breathing techniques and asking for a pause before reacting. This marks the effectiveness of the SEL approach in building emotional intelligence that is applicable in everyday life.

The next discussion highlights the contextual dimension of SEL implementation in Indonesian secondary schools. Some teachers state that the success of the SEL program depends heavily on institutional support and a school culture that is open to a humanistic approach. In schools that already have policies to support student welfare, SEL programs are easier to run and integrated into routine classroom activities. In contrast, in schools

that place too much emphasis on academic outcomes and rigid discipline, the implementation of SEL tends to be hampered. This shows the importance of synergy between the vision of school management and teacher training to realize SEL optimally.

Interestingly, some teachers also adapted SEL practices by incorporating local values and cultural wisdom. For example, reflective activities use regional proverbs to describe the meaning of empathy or social responsibility. This proves that SEL is not a foreign concept, but can be harmonized with existing cultural values. As conveyed by Marlina and Yulianti (2019), a contextual SEL approach will be more accepted and relevant in the eyes of students and strengthen their social identity.

From a policy perspective, the results of this study indicate the importance of developing a curriculum that integrates the emotional and social dimensions of students as part of the learning process. A curriculum that only emphasizes cognitive achievement is not able to reflect student development holistically. The government needs to consider character-based and social-emotional learning as part of the indicators of educational success. In line with that, training for teachers and educators on SEL strategies is an urgency in itself. Without a deep understanding of educators, the SEL program will simply become an administrative formality with no real impact.

These findings also have important implications in the post-COVID-19 pandemic context. The pandemic has left significant psychological impacts on students, such as anxiety, uncertainty, and loss of motivation to learn. In this condition, SEL is an important bridge to restore students' enthusiasm for learning and mental health. Some teachers reported that since face-to-face learning was resumed, the SEL program was used as an initial strategy to rebuild social connections between students that had previously been interrupted. This proves the flexibility and high relevance of social-emotional learning in dealing with crises.

However, there are also challenges faced in the implementation of SEL. One of them is the limited time in the implementation of dense classroom activities by the national curriculum targets. Teachers often feel burdened by administrative demands that it is difficult to insert social-emotional activities on a regular basis. In addition, the lack of an adequate assessment system for SEL competencies is also an obstacle in objectively measuring the effectiveness of interventions. Therefore, it is necessary to innovate a portfolio-based evaluation system or qualitative observation that is able to comprehensively record the development of students' behavior and emotions.

Overall, these results and discussions underline that socio-emotional learning is a strategic approach that can support academic learning while balancing students' psychological aspects. Its positive contribution to learning achievement and mental well-being makes SEL an important element in the modern education system. SEL integration should be a priority in the development of education policies, teacher training, and the development of a learning environment that supports the overall growth of students.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of this study confirm that socio-emotional learning (SEL) plays a strategic role in improving academic achievement while supporting students' psychological well-being. Quantitative findings showed a significant positive correlation between SEL competencies and academic grades and well-being scores, while interviews with educators revealed that the implementation of SEL encourages a positive classroom climate, more active learning engagement, and improved students' coping skills in the face of stress. Thus,

SEL is not only a complement to learning, but an important foundation in creating a holistic and student-centered education.

The implications of these results suggest that schools need to integrate SEL into the curriculum, not as an add-on program, but as an integrated learning approach in daily activities. Education policy support, continuous teacher training, and the preparation of assessment indicators based on social-emotional competence are important prerequisites for successful implementation. In the post-pandemic context and the increasing challenges of adolescent mental health, SEL is the answer to the urgent need to form a generation of learners who are not only academically intelligent, but also emotionally and socially mature. Therefore, investing in socio-emotional learning is a strategic step in building an adaptive, inclusive, and sustainable education system.

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